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ABSTRACT

In two studies which were designed to identify behavioral manifestations of self-esteem, experienced teachers were asked to perform a criterion sort of an 84-item behavioral Q-set, with high and low self-esteem as the criteria. Aims included: (1) identification of classroom behaviors of preschool children associated with self-esteem; (2) application of common referents to the development of a behavioral rating measure; and (3) identification of defining features of presented self-esteem and of its ability to discriminate self-esteem and related personality constructs. Results provided evidence of a high level of agreement about common referents to the term "self-esteem." Items selected as criteria for presented self-esteem were analyzed for conceptual groups, and several dimensions were identified. Referents to self-esteem in preschoolers were unlike those for older subjects. Confidence was a central theme, but competence was not. Findings also suggested that high and low self-esteem were not simple opposites. High self-esteem was associated with confident approach, and the behavior was associated with secure attachment. In contrast, low self-esteem was associated with negative social interactions. Findings led to the development of a behavior rating scale for use in indexing presented self-esteem. (RH)

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BEHAVIORAL REFERENTS OF PRESENTED SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

BEHAVIORAL REFERENTS OF PRESENTED SELF-ESTEEM IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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While self-variables are of critical value to a number of theories, from Bowlby's "working model of self" to James' "self-esteem", the study of self in young children is difficult. Fortunately, three to five-year-olds who are unable to construct a cognition of self do exude a sense of self behaviorally. Alternatives to self-report are needed with pre-school children who cannot verbalize about self-worth; attention to observable behavior is advocated as a method of approach. The behavioral manifestations of self-esteem were sought by asking experienced teachers to perform a criterion sort of a new 84 item behavioral Q-set, with high and low self-esteem as the criterion. Results provide evidence of a high level of agreement about common referents to the term "self-esteem". Items selected as criteria for presented self-esteem were analyzed for conceptual groups, and several dimensions identified. Referents to self-esteem in preschoolers are unlike those for older subjects; confidence and not competence was seen as a central theme. Findings also suggest that high and low self-esteem are not simple opposites. High self-esteem is associated more strongly with the defining feature of presented self-esteem: confident approach, the very behaviors associated with secure attachment. In contrast, low self-esteem is more strongly associated with secondary manifestations of presented self-esteem, notably negative social interactions. Findings have led to development of a behavior rating scale to index presented self-esteem, which has positive scale properties and the potential for use in the study of antecedents of self-concept.

AIMS

1. Identification of the classroom behaviors of preschool children associated with self-esteem.

2. Application of the common behavioral referents for presented self-esteem in young children to the development of a psychometrically sound behavioral rating measure.

3. Analysis of the behavioral referents of presented self-esteem to identify the dimensions of its defining features and ability to discriminate self-esteem and related personality constructs.

METHOD

Subjects and Procedures

Study 1

A. Part 1: Q-sort item development. Twelve teachers of three to seven year olds, with an average of 14.66 years teaching experience, were presented with questions about preschool self-esteem in a structured interview format.

B. Part 2: Q-sort. Twenty-six different preschool teachers, with a mean age of 35.8 years and 9,8 mean years teaching experience, drawn from seven different preschool and day care settings, were administered an 84-item criterion Q-sort of selected preschool classroom behaviors.

Study 2

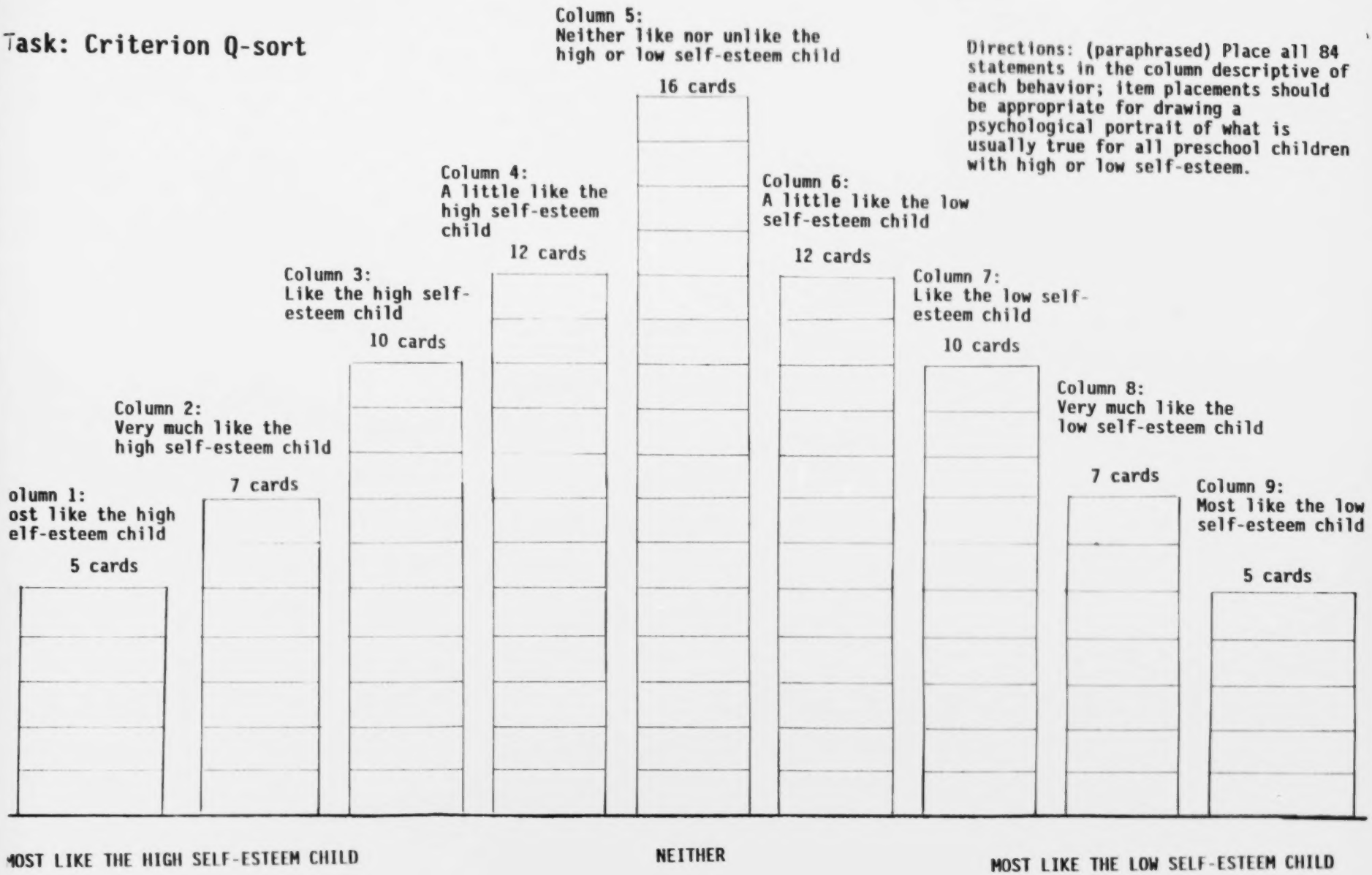
A. Teacher raters. Five experienced preschool teachers in three different preschool settings provided ratings of their current students in the spring of the year.

B. Students rated. One hundred and four children, ranging in age from 3 to 6 years ($\bar{X} = 4.5$) were rated by their teachers on both 1) a rating scale of classroom behaviors and 2) global summary ratings of self-esteem, social competence and intelligence.

STUDY 1: IDENTIFICATION OF SELF-ESTEEM BEHAVIORS

Task: Criterion Q-sort

Directions: (paraphrased) Place all 84 statements in the column descriptive of each behavior; item placements should be appropriate for drawing a psychological portrait of what is usually true for all preschool children with high or low self-esteem.



TASKS

STUDY 2: CONSTRUCTION OF A SCALE FOR PRESENTED SELF-ESTEEM

Task: Rating scale for Classroom Behaviors
of Preschool Children

Directions: These are statements which describe ways that children from 3 to 7 may behave in regular classroom and playground situations. Please read the entire item across the page, both left and right sides, decide which side best describes the child you are rating, and then check whether that is just sort of like this child or very much like this child. You will check just ONE of the four boxes for each statement.

Sample items:

Very much like this child	Sort of like this child			Sort of like this child	Very much like this child
1. ☐	☐	Prefers activities that stretch his/her abilities; sets high goals.	Does not prefer activities that stretch his/her abilities; does not set high goals.	☐	☐
2. ☐	☐	Smiles infrequently; face often shows sadness or negative feelings.	Smiles readily; face does not often show sadness or negative feelings.	☐	☐
4. ☐	☐	Moves forward to do things on his/her own; takes intiative.	Does not move forward to do things on his/her own; does not take initiative.	☐	☐
11. ☐	☐	Is able to set goals independently.	Can not set goals independently.	☐	☐

RESULTS

Study 1: IDENTIFICATION OF SELF-ESTEEM BEHAVIORS

1. Teacher agreement. When the choices for Q-sort placement of items by many experienced teachers are compared, there is strong consensus (50% of variance accounted for) as to the behaviors most representative of self-esteem.

2. Dimensions of presented self-esteem. The prototypical manifestations of self-esteem strongly reflect ONE PRIMARY DEFINING FEATURE: the theme of "CONFIDENCE", especially as demonstrated in approach behaviors. (See table for dimensions within this theme).

3. Contrasts in content of high and low self-esteem. Three separate groups of items were identified:

1) items which uniquely reflect presentation of high self-esteem,

2) items which uniquely reflect low self-esteem, and

3) items which in pairs appear as balanced bipolar indications of both high and low presented self-esteem.

4. Specific behaviors: highlights of the prototypes.

Sample behaviors of the prototypical high self-esteem child emphasize elements of the primary defining feature, approach confidence, and include: approaching challenges with confidence, showing pride in work, setting goals independently, moving forward on his/her own, and asserting one's own point of view when opposed.

The behaviors prototypical of low self-esteem in young children include some parallels, such as shying away from challenge, or not showing pride in work, but are distinquished by an emphasis on secondary manifestations, seen in behaviors such as: overreaction to stress, aggressive hitting, and trouble sharing with other children.

5. Conceptual revision. The pattern of teacher choices indicates that COMPETENCE-related behaviors, previously suspected to be good reflections of self-esteem in the young child, are not prototypical of self-esteem at this age after all.

RESULTS

Study 2: CONSTRUCTION OF A SCALE FOR PRESENTED SELF-ESTEEM

1. Rating scale properties. A new rating scale for presented self-esteem in young children was constructed.

Properties of the scale include:

A. Good item variability, shown by use of the full scale range.

B. Clear discrimination of high and low self-esteem shown in scale comparisons with independent ratings of subjects' levels of self-esteem.

C. Reliability. Use of the coefficient alpha (Cronbach's) as an index determined internal consistency of items for both clusters of items and for the total 24-item scale (alphas range from .86 to .93).

D. Discriminant validity as determined by:

1) the stronger positive correlation ($r = .65$) of the scale with independent summary rating scales to estimate self-esteem, in contrast with a correlation of .39 with intelligence ratings; and

2) Correspondence between differences in high and low self-esteem, as determined by scale scores, and differences in self-esteem, separately rated; ratings of self-esteem for high and low groups showed three times the differential intelligence ratings showed.

E. Convergent validity: all behaviors chosen by one group of teachers in the Q-sort were again chosen as among those most important to self-esteem by a new group of teachers in a separate selection process.

2. Some behaviors associated with the prototypes, particularly negative social interactions, were found to be psychometrically weaker indicators; the weaker items are logically seen as secondary manifestations, or results of self-esteem, and not primary features themselves.

3. Scale improvement: A revised scale of fifteen items has been tested for internal consistency by several criteria and found to be a significant improvement over the previous 24-item scale.

Table 1: Comparisons of Several Criteria
for Rating the Degree to Which
Each Rating Scale Behavior Indicates Self-esteem

Criteria:	1	2	3	4	5	
Item #	Correlation with 3 item self-esteem rating (independent)	Step 3: How often chosen by nine teachers	Column distance from poles in Q-sort	Item-scale correlation (corrected)	Inter-item correlation matrix: # of r's $\geq$ .30	Number of criteria "passed"
Primary "defining" features:						
1.	.46	3	1.231	.7153	16	4
2.	.60	7	1.577	.6454	17	5
3.	.34	9	1.000	.6531	16	5
4.	.30	7	1.308	.6112	12	3
6.	.45	8	1.462	.7202	18	5
7.	.43	4	1.500	.6140	18	4
8.	.42	3	1.808	.6737	18	3
9.	.69	9	1.558	.7423	22	5
11.	.46	3	1.615	.7554	18	4
13.	.57	7	1.808	.6242	19	5
15.	.40	4	2.000	.7327	20	3
16.	.36	6	1.539	.7236	18	5
17.	.43	3	2.115	.7621	18	3
21.	.53	6	1.942	.5524	13	2
23.	.37	6	2.039	.5023	15	3
Secondary manifestations:						
5.	.43	4	1.692	.4535	8	1
10.	.34	7	1.885	.5434	15	3
12.	.25	4	1.923	.3251	4	0
14.	.34	4	1.731	.5950	13	3
18.	.43	4	2.000	.3234	7	1
19.	.27	4	1.924	.4881	15	1
20.	.19	6	2.192	.4083	11	1
22.	.44	5	2.000	.4837	9	1
24.	.35	5	2.058	.5183	15	2

Primary defining features of presented self-esteem include all items which passed three or more of the criteria, excluding those who failed two or more of the three "key" criteria (1, 3, and 5 were designated "key"). "Passing" standards on each criteria were as follows: 1. correlation of the item with a separate rating of global self-esteem of $r > .33$; 2. endorsement as a "best" indicator of self-esteem by at least 6 of the 9 teachers who selected items after rating their students; 3. placement by teachers in the Q-sort among the top 10% (closest to poles) of the original 84 Q-sort items; 4. correlation of the item with the total scale of $r > .60$; and 5. at least 15 correlations of $r > .30$ among the 23 possible inter-item correlations for each item.

CONTENT OF PRESENTED SELF - ESTEEM IN YOUNG CHILDREN

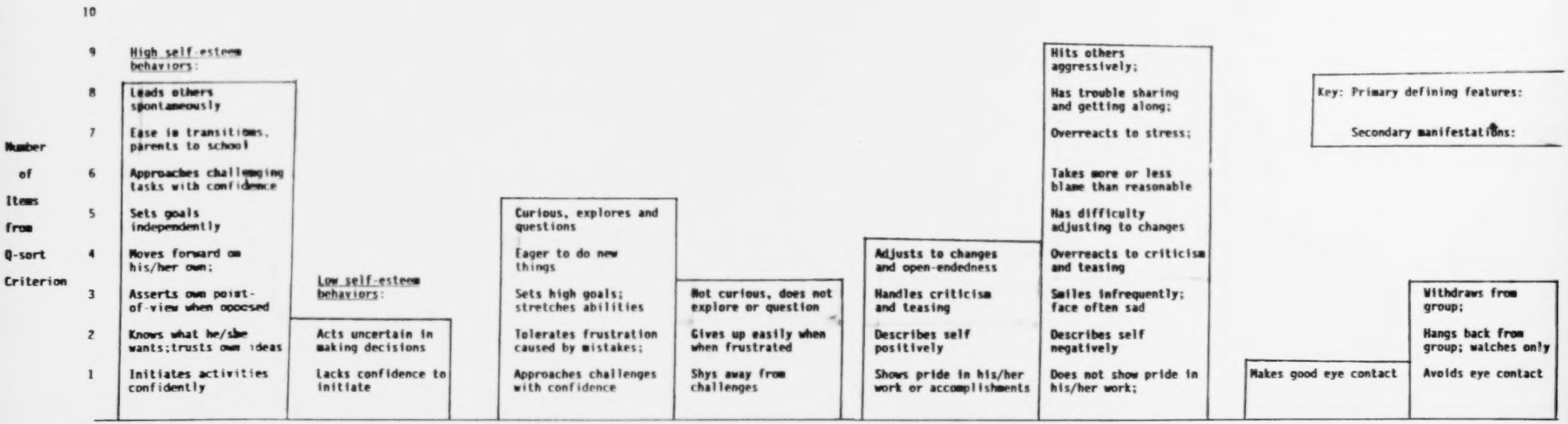
Primary Defining Feature: CONFIDENCE, ESPECIALLY AS SEEN IN APPROACH BEHAVIORS

This theme is present in all 15 scale items;
Item Example: "APPROACHES CHALLENGES WITH CONFIDENCE".

	DIMENSIONS	Number of items and item numbers	Inter-item correlations (range)	Item example:
A.	PREFERENCE FOR CHALLENGE	Five (1,6,11,16,17)	.70 -.83	Sets high goals/does not set high goals
B.	INITIATIVE/INDEPENDENCE	Six (1,3,4,11,16,17)	.60 -.83	Initiates activities confidently/ lacks confidence to initiate
C.	SOCIAL APPROACH/AVOIDANCE	Six (2,4,7,8,13,15)	.53 -.78	Is involved/hangs back, watches only
D.	SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION	Three (2,9,23)	.43 -.65	Smiles readily/smiles infrequently
E.	COPING STRENGTH	Five (6,9,13,17,21)	.44 -.66	Tolerates frustration, perseveres/ gives up when frustrated

(Item content paraphrased here)

CONTRASTS IN CONTENT OF HIGH AND LOW SELF-ESTEEM


Number of Items from Q-sort Criterion
10
9
8
7
6
5
4
3
2
1
High self-esteem behaviors:
Leads others spontaneously
Ease in transitions, parents to school
Approaches challenging tasks with confidence
Sets goals independently
Moves forward on his/her own;
Asserts own point-of-view when opposed
Knows what he/she wants; trusts own ideas
Initiates activities confidently
Low self-esteem behaviors:
Acts uncertain in making decisions
Lacks confidence to initiate
Curious, explores and questions
Eager to do new things
Sets high goals; stretches abilities
Tolerates frustration caused by mistakes;
Approaches challenges with confidence
Not curious, does not explore or question
Gives up easily when frustrated
Shys away from challenges
Adjusts to changes and open-endedness
Handles criticism and teasing
Describes self positively
Shows pride in his/her work or accomplishments
Hits others aggressively;
Has trouble sharing and getting along;
Overreacts to stress;
Takes more or less blame than reasonable
Has difficulty adjusting to changes
Overreacts to criticism and teasing
Smiles infrequently; face often sad
Describes self negatively
Does not show pride in his/her work;
Makes good eye contact
Withdraws from group;
Hangs back from group; watches only
Avoids eye contact
Key: Primary defining features:
Secondary manifestations:
Level of Self-Esteem: High Low High Low High Low High Low
Dimensions: INITIATIVE/INDEPENDENCE PREFERENCE FOR CHALLENGE SOCIAL EMOTIONAL EXPRESSION AND COPING SOCIAL APPROACH/AVOIDANCE

(Item content paraphrased)

CONCLUSIONS

1. Consensus within the conceptions of experienced teachers was demonstrated, supporting the identification of prototypical behavioral referents for presented self-esteem in young children.

2. Findings support the unexpected view that presented self-esteem in preschoolers is defined much more by confidence, in the sense of the child's acting out of a sense of security in approach to the world, than by competence, a core element in James' (1892) historical definition of self-esteem.

3. The defining features of preschool self-esteem are CONFIDENCE and the APPROACH behaviors confidence supports; the fifteen behaviors identified as key elements of presented self-esteem have been conceptually identified as manifesting five different dimensions of the confidence theme:

1. Initiative/independence
2. Preference for challenge
3. Social approach/avoidance
4. Social-emotional expression, and
5. Coping/ego strength.

4. A psychometrically sound assessment instrument, the Behavioral Rating Scale of Presented Self-Esteem in Young Children, was developed as an application of the consensus found.

5. The content of self-esteem has been shown to contain both parallel and contrasting elements at the high and low poles of the presented self-esteem construct.

6. Behaviorally, high self-esteem appears uniquely identified with the presence of APPROACH CONFIDENCE, the primary defining feature of presented self-esteem; in the preschool years, high self-esteem has been associated with positive engagement with materials or activities, especially behaviors organized by self-chosen goals or values.

7. Low self-esteem in the young child is identified behaviorally more with secondary manifestations of presented self-esteem, notably problems in social interaction, than with behaviors on the negative side of the APPROACH CONFIDENCE theme.

8. A conceptual separation of primary defining features and secondary manifestations of presented self-esteem sheds light on the ways specific behaviors contribute to the confounding of self-esteem and social competence.

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